

Bimonthly bulletin on the Ukulele and related instruments  
**MAY-JUNE 2025 SPECIAL**

# IL PICCOLO UKULELE

YEAR 1 No. 3



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**MONOPOLELE** MEDITERRANEAN UKULELE FEST

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## THINGS COME IN THREES

**Editorial.** «Three is a magic number» sang Bob Dorough back in 1973, and he wasn't wrong: this third issue of "Il Piccolo Ukulele" is in fact a Special Edition, also available in English for a very special occasion — the *Monopolele 2025 — Mediterranean Ukulele Fest*. For a still-young bulletin that is gradually taking its first steps, this wasn't an easy choice, but as you know, we love a challenge. So, we've put together an issue rich in content that aligns with our mission, focusing on Italian tradition and innovation, as well as its essential contribution to the international scene.

We begin by highlighting the valuable contribution of luthier Francesco Verginelli, who emphasizes the unquestionable quality of Italian woods, which he uses with craftsmanship, taste, and refined expertise in his ukuleles. In the new Jukebox section — made in

Italy, for the occasion! — we wanted to showcase the variety of Italian singer-songwriter productions, drawing attention to some lesser-known pieces that certainly deserve to be viewed within a historical perspective of ukulele-driven songwriting.

The educational column continues with a new 'bite' by Luca Cocchiere, a new contributor who shares his personal and well-reasoned thoughts on a Hamlet-like dilemma: to pick or not to pick? We're curious to hear your thoughts on this as well. Finally, Davide Donelli introduces us to Carlo Ricordo's Neapolitan early ukuleles, offering a preview of some aspects of the historical research on the ukulele in Italy that he is conducting in collaboration with Giovanni Albini.



As a free gift, you'll find an arrangement of the famous song *Funiculi Funiculà* by none other than Giovanni Albini himself. And of course, there will be no shortage of poems, cartoons, and a packed news section. All that's left is to wish you a pleasant — and delightfully Italian — read!

## THE PICK QUESTION

**Educational bites.** TO PICK OR NOT TO PICK by L. Cocchiere - *El Bastardo Outlaw Picker* - A topic too often taken for granted, the use of a pick on the ukulele has long been a matter of debate. It deserves to be unpacked in all its many nuances (and there are many!), but today we need to keep it short and, more importantly, decisive — so I'll do my best: pick? Personally, no.

Despite the fact that it has been used throughout history by legendary artists — May Singhi Breen, for example — I believe the uselessness of this tiny 'amplifier' when used on our beloved instrument is more than evident. There are many reasons why, the first being tone: ukulele strings are mostly

made from plastic-based materials, just like picks. This combination often results in an exaggerated emphasis on high frequencies, producing what professionals would call a 'cardboard' tone — or crispy, for the anglophiles. In practical terms: it sounds bad, especially for strumming, but in my view the result doesn't improve much even when used for melodies. Add to that the ease with which the strings can be accidentally slapped against the fretboard, producing a harsh, clattering sound. Okay, Roy Smeck slapped like crazy — but he did it without a pick, and you can hear the difference!

Now, it's also worth considering the felt pick, used by greats such as Lyle Ritz, one of the finest jazz ukulele players in modern history — and also a former bassist with the legendary Wrecking Crew (he played the bass line on Booker T. Jones' iconic *Green Onions*, by the way). But let's open a brief, technical parenthesis about the felt pick: due to its size, thickness, and often sharp-edged profile, it can really only be used for downstrokes — which, in my opinion, makes it practically useless. It merely replicates thumb-plucking technique, while limiting the expressive potential of the free hand.

Back to the classic plastic pick (or similar materials): using one drastically reduces the versatility of the strumming/picking hand. You lose access to traditional techniques like the index roll (used in the infamous triplets), and the ability to vary your attack — and thus your dynamics and tone — using techniques such as closed-hand (with the index finger dangling and striking the strings sideways between nail and pad) or open-hand playing (with the fingertips only — similar to the style of Jim Beloff, to give you a reference).

Now let's face the harsh reality of the current scene: especially in Italy, the ukulele is still sometimes seen as a 'mini guitar', picked up like a regular guitar and strummed with a pick, without much thought. Many guitarists-turned-ukulele-players end up frustrated, stuck in a single strumming pattern, lacking volume, and so on. The reason is always the same: a completely wrong approach — which obviously includes the use of a pick, and sometimes (ARGH!) even the dreaded strap — a topic I'll gladly dive into in a future article.

The result? You end up playing your uke like it's Johnny Ramone's Mosrite (note: I love the Ramones — but they used guitars and Marshalls), and pretty soon, you're disappointed that you can't get the hang of finger-style. Before long, your ukulele ends up abandoned in a closet next to your mismatched socks.

That said, it's only fair to consider the cases where pick use can make sense. A great example is the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain, an ensemble made up of different sizes of ukuleles (bass, soprano, pocket, tenor, etc.), each covering different roles. For artistic and tonal variety, each needs a tailored approach — and that might involve a pick. So yes, UOGB — you can use a pick!

But like Scotch whisky: use responsibly... ◀

## ☪ PANEVEGGIO'S ECHO ☪

**Ol'wood.** THE RESONANCE SPRUCE by F. Verginelli - For years I have been dedicated to building ukuleles, striving to bring together tradition and sound research. In this article, I invite you to discover a renowned wood, as noble as it is essential: resonance spruce, the vibrant heart of the sound in many of my instruments.

The spruce (*Picea abies* Karst) grows between 1500 and 1900 meters above sea level in the Paneveggio forest, at the heart of the Paneveggio — Pale di San Martino Natural Park, in the eastern part of Val di Fiemme, Trentino-Alto Adige. Long winters and an extremely short growing season — reduced to about one month per year — slow the tree's development. These conditions are paired with a delicate balance of light, warmth, and humidity, contributing to the formation of a wood that is unique in structure, density, and acoustic quality. Its tight, even grain and excellent strength-to-weight ratio make it ideal for vibration: a key feature for the soundboards of musical instruments.

As early as the 18th century, resonance spruce from Paneveggio was known among luthiers. Although there is no definitive proof, it is widely believed that Antonio Stradivari may have used this wood, given the similarities between the characteristics of his instru-



Illustration by Danilo Vignola

ments and this material. To obtain tonewood suitable for luthiery, trees are selected with diameters greater than 50 cm and an age between 150 and 250 years. Felling takes place according to the lunar forestry calendar: the logs are cut in the days following the December new moon, following an ancient practice that produces what is known as Mondholz, or 'moon wood', prized for its sonic properties and stability.

After debarking, the logs are sectioned according to their intended use: violins, violas, cellos, double basses, guitars, or ukuleles. They are then split by hand along the grain, and the wedges are stacked in the shade for six months to dry naturally. Afterwards, they are further selected and stored for years in the drying room, or xylotheque, where the wood matures slowly until it reaches maximum stability.

A small portion of the finest wood undergoes a special treatment: during winter, it is submerged in the icy waters of the Travignolo stream to flush out the sap channels. In spring, the logs are recovered and processed to produce the so-called 'washed' wedges, marked with the letter 'T', used exclusively for violin soundboards.

The Vaia storm of 2018 also severely impacted the Paneveggio forest: millions of trees were felled, and the ecological balance was compromised. To this was added the spread of the spruce bark beetle, a tiny wood-

boring insect that tunnels beneath the bark, damaging the tree's vascular system and quickly killing it. In an already fragile ecosystem — where only 1% of felled trees meet the requirements for luthiery — the impact of this pest threatens to drastically reduce the availability of resonance spruce, calling into question the survival of a raw material that represents an Italian excellence in the world.

For my ukuleles, I exclusively use soundboards made from spruce logs naturally smoothed by the Travignolo stream, thus achieving the highest possible quality. Moreover, from a single violin wedge, I can obtain at least two ukulele soundboards: one of the many advantages offered by the 'little ukulele'.

## Italy Sings!

**Jukebox.** MADE IN ITALY by D. Donelli

- Jukebox no. 3 of our bulletin opens with Enrico Farnedi singing *Corso Sozzi*, one of the many songs he performs on the baritone ukulele. I always like to emphasize this point because in Italy, this size of ukulele is still underappreciated — though in my opinion, it's an excellent instrument for vocal accompaniment.

Enrico is a 'first-generation' ukulelist, having taken part in Italy's very first ukulele festival in Vicenza in 2008, which also featured, among others, Fabio KoRyu Calabrò, one of the pioneers of the ukulele in Italy. So, naturally, the next track I suggest is *Aquaburgo*, which Fabio performed at that very event. It's featured on the album *UKEit* (Barlumen Records), a record I'll definitely write about more in the future for its undeniable historical value.

Yes, I kicked off this playlist with a bang, fully embracing the Made in Italy theme — an homage to our homegrown singer-songwriters and their relationship with the ukulele. It's a vast and treacherous sea, this selection process of mine — one that may very well cause me to sink or,

more realistically, fall out with friends and acquaintances who find themselves excluded from the list. But as we all know, life is made of choices — sometimes bold, sometimes awkward. Today, I want to offer you a personal overview of Italian songwriting, and I'll do it by spotlighting two female artists who once used the ukulele to craft their beautiful songs, though no longer do (perhaps mentioning them here might inspire them to pick it back up!).

First is Veà Angelotti from Turin, who debuted in 2018 with her EP *Posto Fisso*, from which we'll hear *Tutto Di Me*. Then there's Maru Barucco from Sicily, whose song *Giorgia* still surprises me every time I listen, even years later.

I've tried to curate a lineup that's as diverse as possible, a testament to how the ukulele sparks creativity in curious and original ways. For example, in *Che t'ha fatto*, One-ManPier sings about pineapple pizza with a mandolin-inspired sound, while Remigio Furlanut performs *Buongiorno Taranto*, an anthem to "exorcise resignation," hoping for a radical change in his city of Taranto — wounded by industrial pollution and more.

Then there's *Sentimento Trump* by Davide Di Rosolini, who tackles pacifist themes with biting irony, and *La Casa del Bulgaro* by Le Due Nel Cappello — Sara Magon and Clara Zuchetti — who spin a whimsical tale based on the name of a village near Como.

To wrap up this musical journey, I've chosen two essential bands from the Italian scene: Tubadu, led by Angelo Capozzi, bring us *Calypster* with their sun-drenched, danceable fusion of genres. And finally, Naftalinas, unmatched champions of a retro, festival-flavored Italian spirit, close out our jukebox with the fabulous *Torino Jimmi e le Volanti*. Bye bye!



# Remember!

**Italianness.** ON THE TRAIL OF CARLO RICORDO UKULELES by D. Donelli - I would like to open the column Italianness — dedicated to the history of the ukulele in Italy — with a few previews of a particular research project that I have undertaken together with Giovanni Albini in recent months. A project that is leading us to some interesting discoveries — or perhaps it would be better to say to fortunate findings.

While tracing the origins of the ukulele in Italy, we have come across numerous instruments and documents related to ukuleles 'forgotten': precious evidence of a little-known and fascinating history.

There are many names associated with Sicilian lutherie, particularly from Catania (for example G. Puglisi Reale & Figli, or Ermelinda Silvestri), the Neapolitan luthier tradition (Giovanni di Meglio, Leonardo Bellini, and Carlo Ricordo), and the Milanese one (Monzino & Garlandini). These were artisans and workshops — in some cases full-fledged entrepreneurial activities — mainly dedicated to the making of mandolins and guitars but, as we are discovering, also of banjos and ukuleles, the latter presumably in small numbers.

Around the 1920s, jazz music and American songs began to spread in Italy, both through the radio — which was just emerging — and through records, including Italian ones, that offered overseas rhythms and sounds. With the slow diffusion of jazz in Italy, a gradual and discreet interest began to grow in the banjo, which was sometimes found in instrumental groups playing in Sicilian barbershops and also in dance orchestras. It's easy to understand how in these varied ensembles, the sound of the banjo proved particularly interesting — both for its sharp, percussive timbre and for the cheerful, even playful, character it added to the music.

Both the banjo and, more rarely, the ukulele are mentioned alongside guitars and mandolins on the internal labels of many instruments, as well as in advertising materials. To complete this brief overview, one must not forget the connection many Italian emigrants maintained with their origins — the contact with overseas cultures gradually influenced their taste, interests, and eventually, their fashions. These were very interesting contaminations which, over time, fueled curiosity and interest toward exotic instruments like the banjo, our 'little ukulele', and the Hawaiian guitar.

This brief preface is necessary to tell the story of our discovery of an interesting ukulele bearing a label that reads "Carlo Ri-

cordo — Napoli — Guaranteed Ita[lian]", recovered thanks to a very kind seller from Malta — Joseph Portelli. The seller told us that the instrument had belonged to his Maltese father-in-law and provided a likely dating: between the 1920s and 1930s.

Carlo Ricordo ukuleles are quite rare instruments today, of which only sporadic photos and fragmentary information from expired auctions can be found online — including on Eastern markets. In the well-known Lardy's Ukulele Database they were described as follows: «From Naples, (and imported by J T C, the same company that distributed Down Souths and Handels). This could be a G.Puglisi Rebrand name?»

The acronym "J-T-C" — also present on the label of the instrument we recovered — was linked in the aforementioned database to J. Thibouville-Lamy & Co. (Jetel), a company founded in 1861 in Mirecourt, France, from the merger of several successful ateliers — including Husson and Buthod, known for their high-quality standards inspired by the Parisian workshop of Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume — and also engaged in distribution activities. However, we have found no evidence that this brand is related to the French company, which also had an English branch and historically used the trademark "J.T.L."

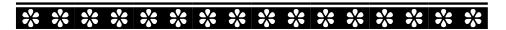
It is interesting to note, however, that the label on the Carlo Ricordo ukulele in our possession is entirely in English, suggesting export to English-speaking countries, or at least targeting an anglophone clientele. Moreover, it seems that some of these instruments — not ours — were sold with a branded mark on the back reading "PATENTATO", perhaps merely to reassure customers about the quality and authenticity of the product.

Also noteworthy is that the 33 cm scale length of the instrument we recovered and the presence of twelve frets are in line with the specifications for a 'standard' ukulele as established by the National Association of Musical Instrument and Accessories Manufacturers (NAMIAM) in 1926.

These are just the first steps in a research project that intersects with the history of Italian lutherie — a project that is deeply engaging for us, offering no small number of surprises, and one we will certainly continue to share with you on these pages with satisfaction. And a bit of emotion. ●

**News Bulletin.** - MILAN: on Saturday, April 19 at 10:30 PM at Spirit de Milan, Fabio KoRyu Calabrò and the jazz quintet Calabrò coi Colibrì delighted the dance night "Holy Swing Night" with their timeless jazz repertoire, performed with the lightness and irony that distinguish them. Full satisfaction from the large audience and the dancers who attended. PISA: at the literary café Volta Pagina on Thursday, March 27, Ukulollo presented and performed live the illustrated sound book Teki. BRESCIA: on Thursday, April 17 at the Piastra Pandolina venue, the new balfolk quartet Strallallora debuted with an original repertoire full of discoveries. The band is composed of Marco Tregambi, vocals and ukulele, Elisabetta Chierici, oboe, Giovanni Rinaldi, clarinet, and Francesco Pelliccioli, harmonium/glockenspiel. ISOLA VICENTINA (VI): on Sunday, April 27 One-ManPier kicked off the "Felle Stilanti Primavera Estate Live Tour" to celebrate 15 years of activity of his Ukulele Sexy Trio. MILAN: at Ristoro delle Rane on Thursday, April 10 the "RANUKEJAM" night was held with the participation of Paul Moore and Ukulollo. PALAZZOLO S/O (BS): on Saturday, May 17 the Teatro Flautomagico Asso-

ciation organized at Parco delle Tre Ville the first "Ukulele Little Festival" with a ukulele workshop held by Aldo Bicelli and the concert-show "Io sono pacifico" featuring Aldo Bicelli and Davide Bonetti. Followed by open stage and open mic. SEREGNO (MB): on Tuesday, May 6 at Circolo Arci Tambourine, the Ukulele Brianza Club organized a concert evening with Paul Moore and Ukulollo. GENOA: on Saturday, April 26 at 7:30 PM at Vizio Wine Bar, singer and ukulelist Renè Rassi and Ukeswing performed their 1940s and 1950s swing repertoire. LUCCA: on Sunday, April 27 at Le Chiavi D'Oro, Lorenzo Vignando and Paul Moore presented "Lucca Ukulele Night", an evening of music and sharing, with special guests and a special thought for Anastasia Giusti. Ukulele workshop and concert with Ukulollo and Paul Moore. Special guest: Luccalele Orchestra. BOLOGNA: on Saturday, May 19 at 12:30 PM in Pavilion 33 of the Fair, on the occasion of Eufonica, exhibition of music and its professions, students from the ukulele classes and workshops held by Maestro Giovanni Albini at the "A. Vivaldi" Conservatory in Alessandria — the first institution in the world to establish a university-level course dedicated to the ukulele — performed works and transcriptions by Vahdah Oleott Bickford, Irving Berlin, Celso Machado, Béla Bartók, Karl Jenkins, Oreste Vassallo, Davide Donelli and Giovanni Albini. Performers: Angelo Borsetti, Marco Borsetti, Davide Donelli, Leonardo Mazzucco, Pierpaolo Menegazzo and Gabriele Sagone. BOLOGNA: later the same day at 2:00 PM in the Green Room of Pavilion 33 at the Fair, Maestro Giovanni Albini and luthier Francesco Verginelli, appreciated even in Hawaii for his exquisite instruments, narrated the history of the ukulele in a lecture-concert titled "From Hawaii to Bach" ranging from the ukulele's vast repertoire to its most refined construction details. Event organized by Assimusica in collaboration with Eufonica & Guitar Show.



## A Ukulele for Peace

My wood grew on battlefields now forgotten.  
Remains of soldiers nourished my roots,  
It made no odds whose country they fought for.  
My strings come from the guts of cats that ate rats,  
Who fed on the fallen in No Man's Land.  
Glue made from the bones of warhorses bonds me,  
My tuners, once bayonets, had skewered men's guts.  
A spent cartridge is now my bridge, did the bullet find its mark?  
When you play me, you will hear no rattle of machine guns,  
Crack of a sniper's bullet or dull thud of artillery.  
War cemeteries are silent,  
There is no end to this,  
But if you want a ukulele,  
Here I am!

Paul Moore (from *Junk Mind*, 2019)



# Funiculì funiculà

Giuseppe Turco / Luigi Denza  
arr. by Giovanni Albini

**Vivo**

Ais - sé - - ra, oje Nan - ni - né, me ne sa - gliet - te,  
tu saj ad - dó, tu saj ad - dó Ad - dó  
'stu co - re 'ngra - to cchiù dis - piet - to far-me nun pò! (Far-me nun  
pò!) Ad - dó lu fuo - co co - ce, ma si fu - je  
te las - sa sta! (Te las - sa sta!) E nun  
te corre ap - pries - so, nun te stru - je sulo a guar - dà (sulo a guar  
dà). Jam - me, jam - me 'ncop - pa, jam - me jà,  
Jam - me, jam - me 'ncop - pa, jam - me jà, fu - ni - cu - lì, fu - ni - cu - là! fu - ni - cu -  
li, fu - ni - cu - là! 'ncop - pa, jam - me jà, fu - ni - cu - lì, fu - ni - cu - là!